

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Education agencies and institutions maintain information about staff to help the education system function efficiently and effectively. Staff information is needed for daily administrative purposes, for making long-term program and policy decisions, and for monitoring efforts to improve the education system. Therefore, it is essential that staff information is collected according to established definitions, and updated on a regular basis.

This handbook focuses on the importance of consistency in defining and maintaining data at every level of the education system so that such data can be accurately aggregated and analyzed for schools, school districts, and states. In addition to providing data terms and their "best practice" definitions, the Handbook offers suggestions about organizing data in a staff accounting system to promote timely and effective use of staff information.

This handbook is intended to serve as a reference document for public and private education agencies, schools, early childhood centers, and other education organizations. It may also be useful to researchers; elected officials; and members of the public, including parents and taxpayers interested in information about individuals serving in the United States education system. Use of this handbook will vary from site to site. For example, it could be used to develop or standardize a local school district's staff accounting system. On the other hand, state education agencies designing and coordinating data collection activities among several state-level agencies might want to select standardized data elements to ensure comparability among agencies. Researchers might refer to the Handbook to identify terminology for designing data collection instruments or studies, and in otherwise working with the education system. Parents and the public may refer to the Handbook to improve their understanding of how staff information may be used.

The selection of data terms included in the Handbook reflects the combined best judgment of many individuals as to which staff data are useful in making appropriate, cost-effective, and timely decisions about providing quality educational services in schools and other education agencies. The terms included exemplify the types of information that could be collected about individual staff members and maintained in permanent or temporary personnel records. The Handbook is not

meant to prescribe what data any particular school or agency should collect. No governmental agency requires the use of all of the terms, definitions, and procedures included here; however, care has been taken to make sure that the definitions are consistent with many governmental reporting requirements existing at the time of publication. The reader is invited to view the U.S. Department of Education's web site at <http://www.ed.gov> for the most current laws and regulations regarding data collections for federal education programs.

Uses of Staff Data

School or education agency officials often require information about an individual staff member or groups of staff members. For instance, an administrator may need to know about the availability of human resources to initiate a new program. Information about the background, education, and professional qualifications of current staff members could also be used to identify possible candidates to work on the program.

Schools, school districts, and state education agencies sometimes are more interested in how groups of teachers are doing than in the performance of individual teachers. For example, a school district might wish to study the relationship between staff development and teacher turnover rate. This type of analysis could be accomplished by using staff records that have had all personally identifiable information removed.

Staff information made available to school or agency officials in a standardized format can:

- Facilitate rational decision making about program development and change
- Enhance program evaluation by easy cross-tabulation of staff data
- Facilitate the estimation of future recruitment needs for individual schools and entire school systems
- Assist in developing sound education policies at all levels

- Aid in the comparison of information among communities and among states
- Improve the accuracy and timeliness of nationwide summaries of school staff information
- Improve the quality and potential impact of data available for education research and evaluation—locally, statewide, and nationwide
- Enhance reporting to the public about the condition and progress of education

Maintaining staff data in a computerized database can facilitate all of the uses described above. Automated data are more easily shared among levels of the education system as needed. Aggregations and analyses can be done with confidence that the data are meaningful if the data elements are consistently defined and maintained within the system.

This handbook does not specify which data should be maintained, or who should have access to any collected data. However, it provides guidance on how to maintain data in a computerized database to provide maximum utility and flexibility when making decisions about education staff.

Automation of Staff Information

With the development of automated, secure management information systems, the ability of education decision makers to use meaningful information has significantly increased. These systems provide for day-to-day administrative needs such as payroll, staffing assignments, and maintenance of licensure records. In addition, automated data systems provide the flexibility to access and analyze data on issues such as supply and demand. Data stored and maintained according to standard formats and definitions can be exchanged with authorized personnel through direct computer-to-computer exchanges via an Intranet or the Internet. However, if the data are to be useful, staff information must be consistently entered into the system and updated continuously. This handbook addresses the issue of consistency in defining and maintaining education staff information.

An important concept underlying the use of this book is that data should be collected only once for each staff member rather than collecting the same data multiple times by different offices. Automated information systems allow relevant data elements to be shared among authorized individuals who need the data, even if these individuals work in a different part

of the education system. New data need only be entered when there are changes or additions to a staff member's file.

To ensure that appropriate and necessary data are maintained in the information system, it is important to consider what questions one might want to address about staffing. Furthermore, data managers may identify opportunities to do analyses by combining staff data with other types of data from within the information system. Carefully designed automated information systems can help increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the education system by allowing access to data by important decision makers. Chapter 3 contains more information about designing such a system.

Common Terminology

Although the education system in the United States is primarily a local responsibility, with funding, administration, and control coming mostly from the local and state levels, education as a whole is a national issue. The U. S. Department of Education has been involved in activities focused on improving the coordination of its data collection activities. Under its aegis, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) has taken the lead in promoting the standardization of data elements and definitions used in education data collection activities, including those relevant to staffing issues. NCES has a mandate to collect "uniform and comparable data" in order to report on the condition of education in the United States. To assist in this mandate, NCES has been working with federal, state, and local education agency representatives to develop guidelines for the collection of comparable and complete data, such as those contained in this handbook. Working with the National Forum on Education Statistics (NFES), NCES has produced a number of important documents that are useful for effective decision making about education programs and individual students. These documents are described in the next chapter.

By adopting the practices, terminology, definitions, and formats set forth in NCES documents as "best practice" for education data collection, local, regional, and national data collectors and users would help ensure the data they use are comparable to those used by others involved in the education system. School leaders could share information more easily because data would be understandable and meaningful to everyone. Superintendents and principals would communicate better with each other. Chief state school officers would communicate more effectively with their colleagues in other states. As

the need arises, this common language would also facilitate information exchange between public and private educational systems. Finally, local, regional, and national decision makers in the United States education system would benefit from the flow of more uniform data.

As information is aggregated from the lowest level of data maintenance (i.e., a school) to the local education agency, to the state education agency, and, finally, to the national level, program designers and

policymakers would be able to make decisions based on a more accurate picture of current and projected needs. Conversely, information could then flow back down the education pipeline to lower levels of data maintenance, in a format that is more meaningful and useful in local decision making. In short, the reader is encouraged to use this handbook (and the other related NCES documents) as a tool for making appropriate decisions about the maintenance and use of data about education staff.